DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 521 CS 508 732

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TITLE Teaching Speech Communication from a Critical Thinking Perspective.
PUB DATE 30 Apr 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (Washington, DC, April 28-May 1, 1994).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Thinking; Higher Education; High Schools; Introductory Courses; *Skill Development; *Speech Communication; Student Needs; Teacher Role; *Thinking Skills; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Speaking Thinking Relationship

ABSTRACT

Teaching speech communication from a critical thinking perspective involves specific instructional approaches and strategies. And the perspective can be applied to "survey courses" such as communication theory, rhetorical theory, nonverbal communication, and organizational communication theory. When a student engages in an internal or interpersonal dialog in a focused, logical manner, he/she is thinking critically. Among the things students should be able to do are make logical inferences based on a body of information; engage in generating and testing hypotheses; analyze common language to eliminate ambiguity and equivocation; and think reflectively about problems individually or in collaboration with others. Teachers should be concerned with educating well-informed and intellectually discerning citizens so that each might engage in a common civic dialog. In contemporary, technological society, individuals are deluged with hundreds of arguments daily, most of which are shams, through deceptive advertising on television, and through the pronouncements of governments. Some approaches that instructors can use in speech communication are: (1) organize a course so as to encourage extended research on a subject relevant to the topic of the course; (2) design the course so that the students are required to demonstrate an acceptable degree of proficiency in the written as well as the spoken word; (3) incorporate principles of logic and argumentation into the course; (4) raise questions about evidence and claims and make discussions of topical issues and problems a central focus of classroom activity; and (5) seek critical thinking outcomes when evaluating your students. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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ED 376 521

TEACHING SPEECH COMMUNICATION FROM A CRITICAL THINKING PERSPECTIVE

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Paper Presented
at

The Eastern Communication Association
Hyatt Regency Hotel
Washington, D.C.
April 30, 1994

CS508732

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> I believe that the most valuable political act any teacher can perform is not to impose particular political views but to teach students to <u>see</u> the words our society tries to inject into them unseen. I believe that strong forces in our society do <u>not</u> really want us to teach students to see--to think critically about their world and to learn how to speak and write powerfully to change it.
>
> Wayne Booth

In this article, I wish to summarize in broad perspective some important instructional approaches and strategies that each of us should keep in mind whenever we intend to teach undergraduate courses in the field of Speech Communication from a critical thinking perspective. My observations will be general, since I would like my comments to apply to a wide range of undergraduate courses commonly offered in the Speech Communication curriculum, primarily so-called "skills courses" like public speaking, group discussion, listening, persuasion, or debate. Also, I would like these observations to apply whenever possible to such so-called "survey courses" as communication theory, rhetorical theory, nonverbal communication, and organizational communication theory, to mention some of the common courses customarily offered in most undergraduate speech communication curricula.

I wish to deal with the following three questions: What do I mean when I use the term "critical thinking"? What is the rationale for teaching from a critical thinking perspective? What are some of the approaches or strategies which encourage critical thinking in students enrolled in undergraduate courses in speech communication?

What Is Critical Thinking?

The term "critical thinking" is a generic concept which has many meanings. Rather than using the phrase "critical thinking" it might be more helpful to use the phrase "the critical thinking instructional movement" since this phrase more accurately captures the essence of an educational movement which seeks to reform the traditional way students acquire knowledge and intellectual insight. Here are ways some prominent scholars have tried to define this somewhat elusive concept:

> reasonably deciding to believe or do something
>
> Robert Ennis

> being appropriately moved by reason
>
> Harvey Siegal

> dialogical thinking
>
> Richard Paul

> Higher order thinking (as critical thinking) is the ability to interpret, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate a body of information.
>
> Benjarmin Bloom

> A process of inquiry that poses questions about the choice and implementation of values, while not proscribing specific answers.
>
> Richard L. Merrill

When I use the term critical thinking, I mean a synthesis of many of the ideas mentioned above. I have written the following in a first draft of an interdisciplinary book on critical thinking:

> What is critical thinking? By critical thinking, I mean a way of thinking that is rational and focused on good reasoning habits. I mean a way of thinking about information that leads to sound conclusions or inferences and which can stand the test of rational examination.

Thus I envision that when a student engages in critical thinking, she demonstrates that she can rationally reflect on problems and their possible resolution. That she is capable of speculative and/or deliberative reflection, i.e. she can engage in an internal or in an interpersonal dialog in a focused, logical manner. A critical thinker, in my opinion, is he who can make a sound (rational) inference and is sensitive to flawed arguments in himself and in others. Students who are critical thinkers, like all people who are critical thinkers, are clear, ordered, and specific in language as expression of thought.

Teachers who plan and deliver their instruction in such a way so as to encourage students to engage in "higher order thinking" (Bloom, 1956) rather than teaching students to memorize or parrot back information, are teachers who are engendering critical thinking abilities in their students. Richard Paul leads a group of critical thinking educational reformers who seek to transform didactic instruction to what Paolo Freire refers to as a dialogical approach to learning. When the goal of teaching is the engengering of critical thinking abilities in students, the teacher attempts to impart some or all of the following kinds of outcomes:

Students should be able to

1. Make appropriate logical inferences based on a body of information.

2. Logically analyze an argument and determine its relative strength.

3. Identify and weigh the quantity and quality of evidence which supports a proposition or claim.

4. Engage in generating and testing hypotheses.

5. Read, listen, write, and speak critically and demonstrate logical command of subject matter.

6. Be familiar with appropriate research strategies helpful to inquiry and exploration of a question or issue.

7. Understand and demonstrate the process of inductive and deductive reasoning and be able to distinguish between truth and validity.

8. Be able to identify and analyze common fallacies of argument.

9. Know how to argue either from certain premises or from probability claims.

10. Analyze common language to eliminate ambiguity and equivocation.

11. Recognize and evaluate common forms of reasoning.

12. Refute weak arguments of others and logically defend one's own arguments from the refutation of others.

13. Demonstrate higher order thinking capability by being able to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information.

14. Think reflectively about problems individually or in collaboration with others.

What Is the Rationale for Teaching from a Critical Thinking Perspective?

There are several important justifications that I think warrant teaching from a focus on student critical thinking competence. First, to be truly educated in the liberal sense of the word, students must master ideas within and across disciplines, and some ultimately may even participate in the extension of human knowledge as researchers and scholars. Second, teaching students to think critically better prepares the student to participate in society as an enlightened and rational citizen. I would like to discuss each of these ideas in some detail in oder to highlight the pedagogical significance of the critical thinking movement.

There is, first of all, compelling evidence of serious deficiencies in the ability to reason among high school and college students today, leading to a very limited influence of education on the student's critical thinking ability. More than forty percent of high school seniors, for example, cannot draw inferences from written material, and only one fifth can write a persuasive essay. Typically, the student graduating from high school and entering college wants to know what to think rather than how to think (Nelson, 1983). College freshmen often lack knowledge domains, have difficulty in acculturating the facts they do

learn, and lack metacommunication skills (Brown, 1989). According to Perkins (1985), depth of argument, for example, increases insignificantly as a result of college instruction. Students are simply not comprehending well their academic subjects, regardless of what grade inflation may lead us to assume. We have learned that college students more often than not make judgments on the basis of unexamined personal preferences, even after four years of higher education (Belenky, et al, 1986).

Moreover, longitudinal studies show an influence of education, but when reasoning about everyday questions, such as bias in the news, only graduate students seem to recognize different points of view (King, Kitchener, and Wood, 1985). Students tend to believe whatever makes sense to them, which researchers have identified as an uncritical "making-sense epistemology" termed "multiplicity" and "subjective knowledge" (Kurfiss, 1990).

Second, there is the concern for educating well-informed and intellectually discerning citizens in our society so that each might engage in our common civic dialog. We as educators should be concerned with effecting good public policy through intelligent public discussion and debate on mutually important social issues (like health care, the environment, economic growth and stability, peace, and the unending quest for a humane and rational system of governance under law). The students we educate must take their place in the world as good citizens who can think critically about the many civic issues of the day and take appropriate action to further the ideal of a just and democratic society.

To create a citizenry of informed critical thinkers is an awesome and unending task (like the Greek myth of rolling a boulder up a mountain only to have it fall back down shortly before reaching the peak). Consider that in our contemporary, technological society, each of us is deluged with hundreds of arguments daily, most of which are shams, having only the flimsiest veneer of rationality holding their parts together. Through television, radio, and print media we are bombarded with incalculable appeals (mostly nonrational in nature) to consume goods, services, and political and social propaganda at an ever accelerating rate. We are told in deceptive ads, for example, to lease a new automobile, even though the number of payments for leasing the vehicle exceeds the amount we would pay if we bought the car outright. We are told in an appeal to our sympathy that we should insure our property and lives with an insurance company because "like a good neighbor, [it] is there." And we are told by the entrenched health care establishment that we have the best medical care in the world, in spite of clear evidence to the contrary. Howard Kahane (1988) uses Richard Nixon's denial that American forces had invaded Cambodia, to illustrate the need for a critical perspective in our daily lives:

> Could it be true that officials of the American government, from the President on down, would lie about invading a foreign country? Yes, it could be true and it was. Why then did so many Americans accept their government's denials, even in the face of clear-cut evidence to the contrary? Because of some of their beliefs about human nature and in particular about how the American system works. Given these beliefs, which formed part of what might be called their **world views**, it *was* unlikely that Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and other top officials would lie about such a serious matter; it *was* sensible to believe what their government--in paritcular their

> president-- told them and to reject what otherwise would have been overwhelming evidence. (p. 14)

Only by educating a critical thinking populace can we hope to control, for example, the further exploitation of the natural environment. Only by educating rational thinking people, can we hope to avert destructive wars of ideology and live at peace in the world. And only by participating in teaching students to think intelligently about the many public issues we discuss, can we hope to ultimately guarantee the good and just society and avert further economic and social eclipse.

What Are Some Approaches and Strategies That Lend Themselves to the Teaching of Critical Thinking in the Speech Communication Curriculum?

Here are some approaches that I would suggest for undergraduate college teachers, which I believe will encourage students to think more critically in undergraduate Speech Communication courses:

A Research Focus. First, wherever possible, organize a course in such a way as to encourage extended research on a subject relevent to the topic of the course. Encourage students to read and investigate a problem over an extended period of time. At Youngstown State University, for example, our basic course in Public Speaking teaches rhetoric and speechmaking by requiring each student to choose a critical issue and give all their speeches on that one topic, be it health care, AIDS, hunger and poverty, or whatever. Such an approach mandates extended research and data collection over sufficient time to allow the student to become truly familiar and think critically about the issues associated with their chosen topic. I tell my students that their research is theirs to keep and can be used in other courses. This idea is in line with Fritz's notion (1991) that beginning college students "should collect databases on at least six major topics of interest. . . . in government, civic matters, science/technology, arts, and international affairs" (p. 6). He goes on to suggest that students incorporate "information from their databases for term papers, community service projects, professional contacts, and [undergraduate] theses" (p. 6). By using such an approach wherever possible, we speech educators, as liberal educators, act as "a counterforce to the prevailing tendency simply to accumulate information rather than organizing or interpreting it" (Spear, 1990, cit. in Fritz, p. 6).

More Emphasis on Writing. Second, design the course so that students are required to demonstrate an acceptable degree of proficiency in the written as well as the spoken word. Consider using written reports, critiques, written outlines of a topic, a brief, a journal of thoughts interpreting data, or extended research papers. All too often, particularly in the skills courses in Speech Communication, students are subjected entirely to objective examinations which emphasize the lower order thinking skills of recall and comprehension. By encouraging legitimate written assignments, we are opening the possibility for students

to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate data, all of which encourage higher order thinking skills. Of course, in order to incorporate written assignments, we as teachers must lobby for reasonable class sizes. The abandonment of required writing assignments is due in large part, I would surmise, because of large classes and the overwhelming volume of work required to adequately critique written work in classes larger than 20 to 25 students.

A Focus on Logical Argument. Third, whenever appropriate, incorporate principles of logic and argumentation into the course. Fritz (1991) recommends that students be expected to demonstrate in the basic course their abilities to differentiate among forms of evidence. I would extend such a notion to all possible courses in the Speech Communication curriculum. Moreover, few students avail themselves of a course in logic or argumentation. The helpful concepts of the logician are closely related to our disciplinary concepts of rational appeal (logos) in rhetoric. Many speech teachers are quite capable of teaching students to make logical inferences, a skill which can then be applied to reading or listening, writing or speaking in a variety of courses in our academic field. Besides planning the course in order to realize some of the fourteen outcomes ennumerated above, I suggest using one of the increasing number of critical thinking textbooks designed to assist students to think more logically about problems, whatever the discipline. Such a text might be a worthwhile supplementary adoption in a course where critical thinking is stressed. I recommend, for example, Browne and Keely's Asking the Right Question (1986) which is a small book with extremely helpful information written in a clear, engaging style, with lots of well chosen illustrations of the logical principles ennumerated.

Also, adapt your lectures so that they encourage reflectivity and critical thinking on the part of your students.

> Nekrasova, cited by Mcleish, has presented eight basic rules that can guide the students from passive receivers of information to reflective thinkers: (1) the lecturer should start the lecture with a presentation of problems and rules or indications of methods for solving them rather than a finished conclusion; (2) the lecture should sometimes include controversial subjects, and time should be allowed for *raising questions* about the subject and debating them; (3) the presentation of material in the lecture should follow systematically psychological principles that indicate how students form perceptions and process information; (4) the significance of the information being presented is made clear by relating it to the students' realities; there is a connection of theory to practice; (5) *there are significant questions posed throughout the lecture with time allowed for questions by the students*; (6) the lecture should support various points with the citation of various experiments and demonstrations; (7) the lecture presents problems that either arise from the lecture itself or from the school materials; and (8) the *students are actively encouraged to pose problems and questions to the lecturer that will be processed at the conclusion of the lecture*. (Hunkins, 1989, p. 144)

Engage in Dialog. Fourth, raise questions about evidence, reasons, and claims and make discussion of topical issues and problems a more central focus of classroom activity.

One of the keys to effective critical thinking lies in the ability to raise questions in order to "know" or "not know" so that on can search to find answers. Avoid the exclusive use of memorization of data by engaging in dialog which seeks to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. Avoid didactic teaching where the teacher tells the student what to think, feel, and believe. Avoid what Friere calls the "banking" approach to knowledge where knowledge is deposited into the head of the student without critical reflection. Instead, engage in dialog with students as often as possible. Encourage students to ask provocative questions and then encourage the student to engage in a logically disciplined attempt to answer such questions. As Freire (1970) says, "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialog there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p. 81). Keep Richard Paul's definition of critical thinking as "dialogical thinking" at the fore of your efforts to instruct your students.

Evaluate Critical Thinking Abilities. Fifth, seek critical thinking outcomes when evaluating your students. Fritz, for example, in his basic courses in Speech Communication at The University of Toledo, uses a portion of the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking test as a pre-test and post-test to assess growth of improved inferential skills in the basic course. Depending on the nature of the Speech Communication course, attempt to evaluate, among other critical thinking skills, the student's ability to identify and weigh evidence and reasons, to distinguish strong from weak arguments, and how to establish the probability of a claim. Provide representative data on some portion of an examation and require students to engage in interpretive, analytic, synthetic, or evaluative thinking and problem solving, using the concepts of critical thinking developed in class. In a word, make your examination reflect in part some ability to engage in higher order thinking.

Conclusion

The goal of all critical thinking pedagogy is to reassert in education the integrity and centrality of logical argument and analysis in all that we do. For those of us who have a disciplinary focus on rhetoric, language, and communication, the critical thinking pedagogical movement means that we believe as teachers that we and our students are ultimately engaged in a search for truth. This is our preeminent occupation as educators.

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